Storytelling and the Art of Teaching

By E. Martin Pedersen

Storytelling is the original form of teaching. There are still societies in which it is the only form of teaching. Though attempts have been made to imitate or update it, like the electronic storytelling of television, live oral storytelling will never go out of fashion. A simple narrative will always be the cornerstone of the art of teaching.

In dealing with stories, learners have an experience with the powerful real language of personal communication, not the usual "teacherese" of the foreign-language classroom. Colloquial or literary, unaffected or flowery-the full range of language is present in stories. Oral stories develop listening skills in aunique way. The listeners benefit from observing non-polished speech created on-the-spot.

While listening to stories, children develop a sense of structure that will later help them to understand the more complex stories of literature. In fact, stories are the oldest form of literature.

Through traditional tales, people express their values, fears, hopes, and dreams. Oral stories are a direct expression of a literary and cultural heritage; and through them that heritage is appreciated, understood, and kept alive.

Stories in the Affective Realm

Through a story, listeners experience a vicarious feeling for the past and a oneness with various cultures of the present as they gain insight into the motives and patterns of human behavior. However, many storytellers feel that cognitive enrichment is not the primary aim of their art. Stories have numerous affective benefits for social and emotional development. A story session is a time to share feelings. A relaxed, happy relationship between storyteller and listener is established, drawing them together and building mutual confidence. Stories help children to know themselves and to know others so they can cope with the psychological problems of growing up. As Augusta Baker and Ellin Greene (1977:17) assert,

Storytelling brings to the listeners heightened awareness-asense of wonder, of mystery, of reverence for life. Thisnurturing of the spirit-self comes first. It is the primarypurpose of storytelling, and all other uses and effects aresecondary.

Storytelling is also a living art. Like music and dance, it is brought to life in performance. A story will be altered by the storyteller's background: his/her choice of setting and detail, and the rapport established with the audience. The storyteller's building materials are words, sounds, and language patterns. The tools are the voice, face, and hands. The product is the creation of a shared human experience based on words and imagination.

Storytelling is an individual art, and an imposed method or ready-to-use plan will prove inadequate. Beginning storytellers must go beyond the rules. They must know their personal strengths and develop their own unique style. As master storyteller Ruth Sawyer (1951:26) puts it, "The art of storytelling lies within the storyteller, to be searched for, drawn out, made to grow."

Selection

Selection requires an ability to evaluate stories and to discriminate between those that meet your learners' needs and those that do not.

1. Read, read, read. Although learning stories directly from other storytellers is the traditional method, you will learn most stories from books. Wide reading gives authority to your telling. Read all types of traditional stories and literary fairy tales, modern tales, picture-books, action stories, romances, fantasies, juvenile fiction, nonfiction, and biographies, etc. Read different versions of the same story.

2. Choose stories you like. You can only effectively tell the stories that you feel comfortable with and which have meaning for you. Choose stories that you can tell-beginners should tend towards folk tales for their simplicity of structure and language, and shy away from complex literary tales.

3. Choose stories appropriate for your learners. Find stories they will like, and that match their age and language level. Fairy and folk takes, which blend fantasy and reality, and use repetitive language, are good for beginners. Contemporary stories which treat problems of personal identity with more elaborate language are better suited for more advanced learners.

4. Choose stories with a simple structure. Look for a single, clearly defined theme, a well-developed sequential plot, a consistent style, standardized characterization (except perhaps for the protagonist), conflict resolution, dramatic appeal, unity, interesting subject matter, and strong emotional content. Avoid stories with long

explanations or descriptions, flashbacks, subplots, and other literary devices that break the flow of a story.

5. Choose stories with positive values. I prefer to tell stories that implicitly express joy, compassion, humor, resourcefulness, and other positive aspects of human nature. On the other hand, psychologists tell us not to be excessively concerned about violence, fear, anger, hatred, lying, etc., in stories.

6. Study the story's background. Know something of the cultural, social and historical background of the story and the country of its origin. If you can't put the story in context, and its contents are not universal, consider choosing another.

7. Test your selection. Final selection is done through trial, ultimately through the positive or negative reactions you get from your audience.

Preparation (prevents forgetting and flopping)

1. Learn the story. Learning the story means to make the story your own. Read it from beginning to end several times. Read it out loud. Master the structure of the story: the beginning (introduction of characters), the body (building of conflict), and the climax (resolution of con- flict). Visualize the succession of scenes. Work on creating sensual setting and character descriptions. Note unusual expressions, word patterns, rhymes, and dialog.

2. Outline the story. Storytellers agree that memorizing word for word is not useful. Learn a story incident by incident, and prepare notes that will help you remember this structure. Typed skeleton outlines stick in the minds of visual learners. Cue card outlines are also useful in preparation and storage of tales, but should not be used in telling.

3. Control the story's length. Long stories can be simplified or serialized, but not excessively modified or censored. Time yourself during practice. A "story hour" should probably include a mixture of activities: reading storybooks, listening to story tapes, reciting poetry, singing songs, playing games, etc. besides the oral story itself.

4. Control the story's vocabulary. A rich vocabulary, with carefully chosen adjectives and adverbs, gives color and texture to the telling. However, you need to be comfortable with your use of language and not try too hard to get things "right" or the story will come out flat and nervous. Don't worry if the listeners don't already know every word; guessing is part of language learning.

5. Refine your storytelling style. Tell the story aloud to listen to your voice - your instrument - which you can exercise, train, and even change. A pause and dropped voice are often more effective than shouting. Take poetic passages slowly; report conversation at natural speed; tell narration more rapidly, building toward the climax.

6. Practice, practice, practice. Practice aloud to yourself, your family or friends. You could practice on audio or even video tape. Practice in front of a mirror to eliminate poor gestures and facial expressions. Some say practice makes storytelling artificial and studied, but it is essential to the beginner.

7. Relax before telling. Warm up as the situation allows with breathing, stretching, and vocal exercises.

Presentation

A story should be presented in a way that emphasizes the "what" of the story and not the "how" of the telling.

1. Start on the right foot. The beginning introduces the characters, sets the scene, establishes the mood, defines the conflict or predicament of the protagonist, and arouses pleasurable anticipation. Then the narrative carries the action. It is sometimes essential for comprehension, before beginning a tale, to make some background comments on new or difficult vocabulary or the cultural assumptions and setting of the story. You might share an object related to the story or light a ritual candle to signal the beginning of the special storytelling time.

2. Be your best self. Express enthusiasm, spontaneity, creativity, and enjoyment. You can create a mood through your physical appearance and mannerisms. Don't rush or ramble. Don't be condescending or phony. Don't reveal nervousness or embarrassment. And most of all, don't let your technique show.

3. Concentrate on your voice. The audience absolutely must hear everything loudly and clearly! Try for a pleasant, intimate, smooth, low-pitched tone of voice. You will need vocal energy for projection, articulation, enunciation, and intonation. Altering your speed and pitch-for example, giving different tones to different characters-adds to the emotional impact.

4. Maintain eye contact. Eye contact is of the utmost importance as it not only holds the listener's attention and involves the listener in the story, but it checks understanding and gives instant feedback.

5. Help with your hands and body. The hands also create. Use only gestures that come naturally, but be aware of your hands; don't hide them or flap them about. Facial expressions and movement are also vital aids. Some tellers use very limited movement; others almost mime a story.

6. Use props sparingly. Some storytellers are strongly against the use of any objects, puppets, costumes, bells, etc. They consider them a clever showman's device and an unnecessary distraction. I don't feel so strongly and suggest that you try them out and see the effect.

7. Pay attention to the physical setting. Some rooms can kill a good story. You need a quiet, well-lit, acoustically acceptable, comfortable space. You can tell a story standing up (for more freedom of movement) or sitting on a stool (for better eye-contact) before a semi-circle of chairs or (for more intimacy) sitting in a tight circle on a carpet.

Follow-Up Activities

While no follow-up is necessary-stories are valuable in their own right, but a variety of options are available.

1. Ask comprehension questions carefully. If a story is followed immediately by a barrage of comprehension questions, its artistic value is lost and storytelling suffers. I would suggest waiting at least a day to ask the usual who, what, where, when, how much, and why questions. There are other, more creative ways to use questions. Multiple choice questions and questions that can be answered by inference can be used. Suppositions can be made, like: What would you have done? What should the character have done? Students may choose from a list of questions provided by the teacher and ask a partner. It's even possible to give out comprehension questions first and have the students construct the story.

2. Invent exercises in phonetics, semantics, and syntax. There is no limit to the language exercises that can be based on a story: introduction of new vocabulary in lexical sets, rhyming sets, or grammatical sets; verbal practice and grammatical

analysis of repeated phrases: "Who's been sleeping in my bed?" "I'll huff, and I'll puff and I'll blow the house down," just to name a few.

3. Do listening activities. After a tale, listeners can demonstrate comprehension by: comparing, discriminating, predicting, sequencing, classifying, transferring information, etc. Unlike other listening activities, stories are often repeated, but never in exactly the same words.

4. Do oral activities. Choral reading, story fill-in, add-on stories, building a tale from key words, etc., are all options. Discussion topics can be taken from the story's themes. Students can retell their favorite tales, or invent stories based on their own personal experiences.

5. Do written activities. Rewriting, summarizing, or paraphrasing a tale are obvious and worthwhile activities. Written exercises can include controlled writing dictation and cloze paragraphs, guided writing (sentence extension or sentence-combining exercises), or free writing using the tale as a literary model. Other options include: journal writing, research projects, making up original stories patterned on stories told to the group, and writing a poem or a play version of a story.

6. Do visual activities. Story-related artwork can include: posters, models, collages, crafts, masks, puppets, mobiles, photos, picture stories, blackboard drawing, etc. Stories are part of aesthetic education and develop creativity.

7. Do creative drama activities. There are many story games to play. Stories naturally lend themselves to be dramatized, mimed, or roleplayed. Prepared dialogs from tales can be recited, or students can tell or retell stories they choose or make up themselves.

Stories educate, illustrate, enlighten, and inspire. They give relief from the routine and stimulate the mind. They are a great motivator for teachers as well as for students. Stories are used in an exclusively positive scholastic setting, i.e., no grades, no failures, no textbooks, no notepads, no dictionaries, no costly audiovisual equipment- *nothing* coming between the listener and the teller. In EFL, stories fosternderstanding and acceptance of the foreign language and culture.

Storytelling is learned slowly over a long time, but the novice and the expert storyteller can both experience success on different levels. A storyteller eventually makes a personal collection of stories for various occasions and purposes. Storytelling is a folk-art which can't be manipulated, intellectualized, or mass-produced. Its magic is unique. The storyteller is always a teacher, and the teacher is always a storyteller.

[Storytelling] can take many disciplines from the realm ofthe often dreary textbook and raise them to great heights ofexciting, fruitful experiences in learning. Storytelling asa pedagogical technique has been used by the world'sgreatest teachers. Jesus used it, as did Plato, Confucius,and other great philosophers and teachers. . . . The modernteacher who employs this technique as a teaching tool isusing a technique of teaching that has stood the test oftime (Chambers 1970:43).

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